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ABSTRACT

Institutions of higher learning must focus on new ways to serve the at-risk student and the black male at-risk student in particular. By developing and implementing a plan, any teacher can foster retention of at-risk students, even in the absence of institutional support. Twenty effective techniques are: (1) learn students' names; (2) assign specific office hour visits; (3) use "calling cards"; (4) touch each one each day; (5) use peer tutors and counselors; (6) use collaborative learning frequently; (7) use five minute "get acquainted" sessions; (8) encourage club and campus activity joining; (9) walk them through the campus; (10) take fieldtrips; (11) vary instructional mode; (12) make very short-term assignments; (13) set very short-term goals; (14) include everyone in classroom discussion; (15) make a scrapbook about successful role models; (16) be fair, firm, demanding, consistent, and predictable; (17) provide all materials from the beginning; (18) be animated in instruction; (19) teach a memory skill; and (20) be "up beat" and cheerful. The basic needs of at-risk students are essentially the same as those of any student--the only difference is that these students need more of the above than the others. Serving at-risk students well will mean serving all students well. (SR)

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CLASSROOM TECHNIQUES FOR IMPROVING BLACK MALE STUDENT RETENTION

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THE BACKGROUND FOR THE STUDY AND PROGRAM

Several years ago I became aware of the need for some action on Laney's retention front, when it became clear that we were loosing an inordinate number of good Black students who had ability and skills. Some of those students were "at risk" students and many were not. Yet, too many of them dropped out, just disappeared, and that without bothering to "drop" officially. At the time, nobody here was addressing the problem, so that I decided to attack it on my classroom level. In so doing, I developed the plan that I present here. This plan was based on the philosophy of an experimental program that we had on our campus some years before. Its success was its undoing. The politics of that does not need to be discussed here. The concept of that experimental program was a good one for the students that it served, namely, highly "at risk" black make students. The program focused its instruction and interaction with its students on "humanizing" the curriculum. The effectiveness of the Experimental College can still be shown by looking at the statistics for any semester during its tenure. The Spring Semester of 1971 found 250 students enrolled and 241 of those students finished the semester. The ideas of that program can be incorporated into the plans of any teacher. Let me encourage you to begin now and try these ideas. They will work for both you and for your "at risk" students.

A CLASSROOM TEACHER'S PLAN FOR BLACK MALE RETENTION

Traditionally, the teacher works in the space of the classroom alone in the struggle to share information in ways that students will learn it. The key word here is ALONE. In the face of modern demands requiring a multicultural work force by the next century, it is paramount that the isolation of efforts not be limited to those of the teacher. This can no longer be the norm nor the model for Black Student Retention. We need trained, skilled Blacks in the work-force. Thus, the institutions of higher learning must focus on new ways to serve the "at risk" student and the Black Male "at risk" student in particular. Should we find the formula that works for this student population, we will have found the formula that serves all students. The kinds of experiences that enrich "at risk" students are the kinds of experiences that serve all students well.

The research shows that the ideal retention programs are those which are institutionally based, campus-wide, highly structured affairs. We wonder why there are not more successful programs modeling on more campuses. Is there a leadership vacuum? Whatever the cause of the paucity of programs, the solution will often fall on the individual teacher to address. If the problem is to be attacked and solved, teachers will do the attacking. Without strong leadership, many effective things can be done to greatly enhance student retention. If these things are not done by the classroom teacher, who will help students

stay through our courses? Teachers are the answer and there are many reasons for that fact. The teacher is the closest to the problem. Secondly, it is easy for the teacher to start a specific program because he has the autonomy to try new things by virtue of the door on his classroom. When that door is closed, the teacher can try new techniques at will. Each teacher brings special qualities to the task. Energy, firmness, fairness, openness, warmth, charm, and the creativity that will be needed to make a retention program work. A willingness to take a chance on the part of the teacher helps here too. By developing a plan that you think will work with your students, and by deciding to implement that plan, any teacher can foster retention of his "at risk" students, as he works alone. I repeat, with support, retention programs will work best, but even without that support, teachers can be very successful in keeping students in their classes. Develop a plan and go to work.

TECHNIQUES FOR ANY TEACHER

Techniques that any classroom teacher can use to foster student retention include those that I have listed here. I shall briefly discuss each item as a way to clarification of each item's usage and or purpose. These are techniques that I have used with my students for years and they work.

1. Learn their names
2. Assign specific office hour visits
3. Use "Calling cards"
4. Touch each one each day
5. Use peer tutors and counselors
6. Use collaborative learning frequently
7. Use five minute "get acquainted" sessions
8. Encourage club and campus activity joining
9. Walk them through the campus
10. Take fieldtrips
11. Vary instructional mode
12. Make very short term assignments
13. Set very short term goals
14. Include everyone in classroom discussions
15. Make a scrapbook about successful role models
16. Be fair, firm, demanding, consistent, and predictable
17. Provide all materials from the beginning
18. Be animated in your instruction
19. Teach a memory skill
20. Be "up beat" and cheerful

These techniques can be applied at once and should be, beginning on the first day that you meet your class. It is not as formidable as it might appear to be. The explanation that follows will show how easy it is to do.

THE EXPLANATION OF TECHNIQUES

1. LEARN THEIR NAMES.

Learn their names. This might seem obvious to an experienced teacher, but it needs to be said again. Learn and call students by their name when referring to them. especially when referring to Black male students. If you can memorize their names on the first day, that is a good idea.. But, learn names as quickly as you can. Issues of self-worth, specialness, and identity are addressed in a positive way by your utilizing this first technique.

2. ASSIGN SPECIFIC OFFICE HOUR VISITS.

Assign specific office hour visits. These are to be completed during the first two weeks of school. I know that this will take a lot of your time during the first weeks, but the "pay off" is wonderful in its effect upon retention. These visits can be very informal, consisting of a simple discussion of where they went to high school and what plans that they might have for their future vocation. These visits might consist of issues that the student wants to discuss and I always ask at the start of these visits a question which allows the student to bring up issues that concern him. The range of topics brought up during these visits have been broad and rich. I am frequently told information and facts that they would not tell their parents. These kinds of revelations unfold once one's trustworthiness is established. Health problems, drug problems, issues of abortion, financial problems, relationship problems, and considerations of suicide are just a very few of the issues that I have listened to during these office hour visits. From these discussions, I have learned that there are many factors weighing upon students that do affect their ability and willingness to complete courses. I have also found that when the problems are addressed, students who were contemplating dropping out will reconsider and make great efforts to finish the course work. These newfound efforts prove what we, the teachers, have to believe. Students want to succeed and they also want to please. Given the chance, they will.

3. USE "CALLING CARDS".

Use "calling cards" which are 5" by 8" index cards folded to make a four-sided 4" by 5" index card. Write the name of a classmate on one "page" of the booklet and assign them to call each person listed at least twice per week. Most students will call one or two classmates and that is enough. The "networking" is established and class bonding begun. Feelings of isolation and loneliness are reduced mightily by the use of these cards. The time and date of each call are recorded by students and monitored by me weekly. Students using the cards "stick" and - the law of the Unexpected Consequence - do the best work. Use this technique. It works.

4. TOUCH EACH ONE OF YOUR STUDENTS.

This technique might appear to be dangerous to some of us but it can be done in a number of ways. Ideally, this technique is applied unobtrusively. I do it by making a hand to hand contact as materials are passed out or by brushing or touching a hand or shoulder as I "work the room." The same technique can be applied in a very clear and overt way too. Shake hands with the students as they leave the classroom. This eliminates "charges for the door" at the end of class periods. Of course, shake hands when they come to your office for a visit. This technique is quintessentially the humanizing of the learning experience.

5. USE PEER TUTORS AND COUNSELORS.

Use peer tutors and counselors because students will "hear" from peers what they cannot hear from you, the teacher. Choose former students who have achieved well or utilize the effective learner who is in the current group. With a little training, these students can be a wonderful resource for both the students and for you. Training consists of your making clear the material that you want peers to teach. A little monitoring insures the success of this technique's usage.

6. USE COLLABORATIVE LEARNING FREQUENTLY.

Use collaborative learning frequently. Collaborative learning is what we used to call "small group" learning. Use it. It works. I employ this technique when there is some in-class study effort needed. Students share questions and information in these small group sessions that foster their learning skill development. These groups provide a comfortable place for "at risk" students to explore ideas in a rather safe less exposed way than would occur in a discussion held by the entire class. Safety is the key here. Since so many of the students that we want to serve with our program are "at risk" students, this safety factor is important. The "at risk" student by definition is one who has been wounded by school experiences so that he needs lots of protected spaces to work on developing his skills and confidence. This technique provides that security. Places in the instructional plan where this technique can be used include reading, discussion, test preparation, and brain storming. These are just a few ideas for this technique's employment. You can think of a lot more instances where COLLABORATIVE LEARNING can be developed so that you may better serve your students.

7. USE FIVE MINUTE "GET ACQUAINTED" SESSIONS.

Use five minute "GET ACQUAINTED" sessions at the beginning of each semester. Structure the five minutes by having the students ask each other specific questions about themselves. I use the following instructions.

a. Tell your name.

b. Tell one thing that you like about yourself.
c. Tell one thing that you would like to improve upon about yourself.

Use this five minute session for two weeks. Encourage inclusiveness by having the students talk with students whom they do not know. This is "networking" at another level from the "Calling Card" and this reinforces the concept of making connections with fellow students, reducing feelings of isolation. The reduction of feelings of isolation is a major one for this program and needs attacking on as many levels as possible.

8. ENCOURAGE CLUB AND CAMPUS ACTIVITY JOINING.

Encourage clug and campus activity joining. Research on student retention shows that the pertinacious student is the student who has some connection with out of class activities. That student is more likely to finish course work than those "parking lot-classroom-parking lot" students, for which the junior colleges are famous. Commute institutions have a particularly difficult time holding students. The reason for this is that students who are without connections lack reasons for "sticking around" when there are problems or when there are difficulties of any kind. The way around that problem for the classroom teacher lies in the club or group activity that can be found on any campus if you look for them. Introduce your students to them. They will not know about most opportunities for such activity. You have to be their resource person. With a very small variety of choices, you can interest most students in at least one such activity. You may have to take the students to the meetings. If that is required, do it. School work becomes more of a balanced activity for students when they are involved with an extra-curricular activity. These "outside" interests show how school work is a part of the rest of the world and how students are a part of that world. I am still talking about reducing feelings of isolation and feelings of being far from those things which are important and pertinent to "at risk" students.

a. Swim Club
b. The Black Student Union
c. Drama Club
d. Photography Club
e. Dance groups
f. Volunteer groups
g. Music groups
h. Art groups
i. Sports groups

These are just a few of the kinds of activities that you can look for to help your students get connected to your campus. You can think of a lot more and better ones than I have listed here, I am sure. Remember, a connected student is a retained student.

9. WALK THEM THROUGH THE CAMPUS.

Walk them through the campus. With "at risk" students, make no assumptions about what they understand regarding your campus lay out. Take your students on a walking tour of the grounds, naming the buildings and features that you know that they need to be familiar with in order to function on your campus. Use a map, but be sure that your students know how to read a map. Teach them that skill on the first walk that you take. They will like that. After all, information is information. Be detailed in your descriptions of your campus and its special qualities and problems. Access for all students should be a part of this presentation. Special places for students to gather after class should be highlighted and emphasized. Unique aspects of your campus should be focused upon. Dry cleaning, shoe repair, plastics, bakery services and facilities such as these are the features that I focus on when I lead my tours each semester. You will find outstanding features on your campus too. Share these facilities with your students. When students discover that there is more to the campus and school than books and classes, they are given yet another reason for staying with your program. The more reasons that they can find for staying the better it is for everyone.

10. TAKE FIELDTRIPS.

Take fieldtrips. Students report that the most memorable learning experience that they ever had that was school connected occurred on a fieldtrip. This is true at all levels. Take students on fieldtrips. They learn a lot and remember what they learn through that kind of experience. With the "at risk" students, fieldtrips are especially useful since these students are less likely to have been exposed to the experiences offered by the fieldtrip. I have taken my junior college students to the zoo for years and each year there are students who had never been to our zoo, or any zoo. You will find the same lack of experiences a given in the lives of your "at risk" students. A broadly experienced student is a better prepared student. That student has more to think about, to talk about, and to write about. Give them better opportunities to think. Take them on fieldtrips.

11. VARY INSTRUCTIONAL MODE.

Vary the instructional mode by lecturing a little, very little. Use video. Make your own, if need be. Use collaborative learning techniques. Use short student presentations as a part of your instructional mode. Avoid classroom arrangements that have students looking at the back of each others' heads. Sit in circles so that students can see each other and you as well. Avoid sitting behind your desk. If you must sit, sit with the students. Use films. Use TV. Use guest speakers. The key here is to avoid the rut of doing it the same way all of the time. Avoid boring these students.

12. MAKE VERY SHORT TERM ASSIGNMENTS.

Make short term assignments which are clear. Make short term assignments which are easily monitored. Make short term assignments which are easily tested, assessed. Make short term assignments which are given at the beginning of each class period, never shouted as students head for the door. Make short term assignments which convene and dismiss each class, thus defining the class time's space. Make short term assignments for which students are held accountable. Make short term assignments which provide students with immediate gratification when they are completed on time and well. Make short term assignments which allow you the give frequent complements. Get the idea? Make short term assingments. Use "a" to "d" and avoid the others.

a. In ten minutes...
b. In twenty munites...
c. By the end of the hour...
d. For tomorrow...
e. For next week...(rarely)
f. By the end of the semester...(never, or not until students are really clear in understanding academic time.)

13. SET VERY SHORT TERM GOALS.

Set very short term goals so that you "at risk" students do not get overwhelmed by academic time. They need to learn how to use their time and it is up to you to teach that concept through the use of goals. This is true of assignments and it is true of goals too. The assignments are on your terms, the goals on theirs.

a. What do you want to learn during this hour?.
b. What do you want to learn by tomorrow?
c. What do you want to learn by the end of the week.
d. What do you want to learn by the end of this Unit?
e. What do you want to learn by the end of the semseter?
d. What do you want to learn to get a good job?
f. What do you need to learn to haave a fulfilled life?

Here, I ask students one other question, which is,"What are you doing now to have what you say that you want."

14. INCLUDE EVERYONE IN CLASSROOM DISCUSSIONS.

Include everyone in classroom discussions so that your students will begin to feel that they belong to your group and so that their ideas, feelings, and values are valuable, respected. The comfort level of the "at risk" in your classroom correlates mightly with his willingness to complete the course. Feeling

14. INCLUDE EVERYONE IN CLASSROOM DISCUSSIONS. Cont.

safe is a major problem for "at risk" students since so many of these students have found that school has too often been a place where they were not safe, respected, valued, honored, or celebrated. Use ideas that students bring up as a part of the instruction, when appropriate. Incourage divergent thinking by pointing it out and complementing it. Ideally, each student will get to recite during every class period. For this ideal to obtain requires a highly vigilant teacher. Avoid the trap of allowing just two or three highly verbal students to monopolize the idea field of "feeding back."

15. MAKE A SCRAPBOOK ABOUT SUCCESSFUL ROLE MODELS.

Make a scrapbook featuring successful Black role models so that the students can build an ongoing tower of models that they can learn from and plan to emulate as they progress through you course and their course work. This technique is very easy to use and the students get excited about the persons that they want included in their scrapbook. Sports figures might be their first choices but their tastes will broaden as other kinds of "models" are introduced and as their sophistication grows. The excitement that this one technique generates each semester might force the purchase of another scrapbook. This represents an inexpensive means to "consciousness raising." Use of this technique provides students fresh ways of thinking and rethinking their choices of the kinds of lives that they might want to lead. This technique "pushs back horizens" for your charges in that it opens new areas of possisble achievement that most will not have ever known about and therefore, never have considered. This is another one of the techniques that works. Try it. They will like it. Another unexpected consequence of the use of this technique happens to be the fun that is added to you program by the energy and interest that this one simple idea generates in the classroom setting. Sometimes, this technique takes on the feel of a copetition if it is assigned as a collaborative learning or small group activity. Students find it exhilarating. I think that most classes can stand more of that.

16. BE FAIR, FIRM, DEMANDING, CONSISTENT, AND PREDICTABLE.

Be fair, firm, demanding, consistent and predictable when working with "at risk" students. They need a place were there is fairness as a given in their lives. Much of what they have experienced is not fair and has not been fair and looks as if it is not going to be fair. Establish fairness for them. Be firm with these students. Since many of their experiences have been in households where there are few rules which are adheared to, your firmness keeps them from having to test the limits for their behavior and, I believe, their thinking as well. Be demanding of them. Insist on work being done and being done well, on time, and neatly. In so doing, your message to them is that you think that they can achieve. We know that the most highly correlated factor

16. BE FAIR, FIRM, DEMANDING, CONSISTENT, AND PREDICTABLE. Cont.

affecting student performance is teacher opinion of student ability. When the teacher believes that the students can do well, they do well. Send the "you can do it" message. Be consistent in your style of handling students and their needs.Don not make your students have when you will appear for class nor when you will dismiss your class. Keep materials in their places, thus avoiding scavenger hunts when materials are needed. Be predictable. Treat behavior and the expression of ideas in ways that the students can quckly become comfortabe with and learn to relax with as they learn in your class. Tolerate no inappropriate behavior or language, none. By the way, none of these points exclude humor or laughter. Sarcasam is not humor to the scarcasee. Avoid it when working with "at risk" students.

17. PROVIDE ALL MATERIALS FROM THE BEGINNING.

Provide all materials from the beginning of the semester. The students will feel better if they come with everything that they need and so will you. Some money might have to be spent on this item, but it is woth the price. You can always include this item on your tax forms. Use institution monies when you can. Many times there are funds available. Use them.

18. BE ANIMATED IN YOUR INSTRUCTION.

Be animated in your instuction. Move around the room. Use other voice tones than your "school teacher" tone. If you need to watch some performers, do so. Use some of their techniques in your classroom. Avoid being and looking boring. You are competing with a visually oriented student body, so use all of the energy that you can here. Energy is central to your being the center of their focus. Get their attention and keep it by being animated in your instruction.

19. TEACH A MEMORY SKILL.

Teach a memory skill to your students during the first or second day's class meeting period. I use the "rhymed number" skill first. It is easy to learn and it works for the students right away. The "chaining" skill may also be used as well. Pick one adn teach it. Students will love having at their command a real learning tool that they can see the value of and use instantly. Become familiar with these techniques. There are lots of memory techniques to be found in many of the new and not so new "pop" memory books shich are carried in most bookstores. Find one and share these skills with your students.

20. BE "UP BEAT" AND CHEERFUL.

Be "up beat" and cheerful as you work with your "at risk" students. They need the "lightness" of good cheer and pleasantness that you, the teachers, create in your work space and their learning space. Remember, the most important mental health in the classroom is yours. So keep it clear, positive, and friendly. If you are feeling dour, stay at home until that feeling passes. These students need just the opposite, so offer it to them and watch them grow. Both you and they will love the warmth of the safe and supportive space for learning, your classsroom.

Now, wasn't that easy? It really is easy to do. Try these ideas with your students. Add to these techniques as you will, remembering that the basic needs of these "at risk" students are essentially the same as those needed by any students. The only difference is that these students need more of the above than the others who might spring from different wells. Serve these students well and you serve all students well. Good luck will help but good work is more important.